

**FORCED TO REINVENT:
HOW CHURCHES MANAGED TO BE RELEVANT
DURING THE LOCKDOWN
(A STUDY OF SELECTED CHURCHES IN
NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION)**

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ABSTRACT

Most churches within the Baptist cycle in Nigeria had always been analogue churches pre-pandemic. Baptist Church had always done most of its activities within a physical environment; communiqués, church bulletins, and financial reports, among other documents, were always handed to church members in paper formats. Apart from informal discussions on church group chats, nothing of significance was ever conducted on social media. But when the lockdown was enforced across the country, church leaders were forced to figure out ways of keeping in touch with their members and create channels through which church members could keep their obligations to the church. The congregational leadership style adopted by the Baptist makes each local assembly semi-autonomous. During the lockdown, most Baptist pastors were affected since there had never been any existing robust online communications for the spiritual development of members, asides from daily prayers or occasional sermons sent

mainly through WhatsApp. Furthermore, collecting tithes and offerings had been very difficult due to the economic situation that most members found themselves in and the new payment method through online banking platforms. This study examines how some selected Baptist churches in the Ewekoro local government area of Ogun State, which low-income earners dominate, could cope with the new realities occasioned by the lockdown of churches in Ogun State. This descriptive research uses analysis of social media activities and interviews of church leaders and selected members to analyze how churches reinvented themselves in the face of the new normal.

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Introduction

Humans are averse to change; this averseness to change results from challenges that the change process brings to their lifestyle and daily routine. However, despite this natural resistance, specific changes are inevitable since events beyond human control occasion them. One such event was the lockdown of religious institutions occasioned by the first wave of Covid-19 in Nigeria. At that time, all churches were under lock and key, which made physical worship non-existent, while church leaders, had to think of non-physical means of meeting the spiritual standards of their members.

Human history has always had events that forced people to make a 360-degree change or turn around when compelled by circumstance to alter an earlier position or put novel ideas in place to survive an adverse event. To provide a suitable historical antecedent for the thesis of this paper, we reach out to the attitude of the church and non-church groups during the

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height of the civil rights movement in Africa and America. After a series of twists and turns, most black churches started agitating for change after enduring centuries of white supremacists' brutal segregation and inhuman treatment. The church clearly articulated its positions, backing them up with relevant scriptures and engaging in nonviolent civil resistance series. After a while, they started supporting numerous non-dark temples in the North and a couple of in the South and alliances of Jewish, Muslim, and common gatherings. Sadly, however, most Southern Christian houses of worship were against administrative change that precluded racial isolation by than ever. Yet, today, we find coalitions of strict and mainstream bunches across the North and South of America settling on controversial problems like ladies' privileges, marriage correspondence, early termination, capital punishment, and firearm control, which was unrealistic, ages ago.

Realizing that individuals are exceptionally religious does not inform us concerning their moral decisions however much we could envision. Notwithstanding, finding out about the profundity of legalism can frequently foresee the degree of inspiration and interest. Religion makes moral fights fiercer and the warriors more self-assured on all sides of anything that issue is in question.¹ How the congregation answers issues

¹Jeffrey Stout's Unpublished Gifford Lectures, *Religion Unbound: Ideals and Powers from Cicero to King* (Internet); available from <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lecturers/jeffrey-stout>; accessed May 19, 2021.

relies upon the division, the nearby gathering, and the impression of individual admirers.

Back to the recent issue of COVID-19, we can assert that the religious community's actions or inactions directly impact the cumulative response to the challenges of the pandemic. The church remained relevant because quite a significant percentage of human beings on earth were agitating for the church to pray for the pandemic to stop. The church did not just pray; they prayed very well! The evangelicals were praying in the US, Nigeria, and other parts of the globe. Nearly all religious groups were organizing prayers to restore the nation and the entire universe at large. The church did not only pray; the church also gave. The church supported the poor, who were grossly affected by the lockdown. The church did everything within its power to cushion the effect of the financial challenges and losses suffered by the people. The church also gave plausible explanations for the un-resolvable riddle of the origin of the pandemic. The church attempted to point the people to a spiritual 'course' for the pandemic; some of such were speculative and eschatological.

Be that as it may, standard epidemiological models of viral spread don't represent human factors like strict philosophies and values. People are mind-boggling, and how religion winds around itself through the grid of human existence is staggeringly complex. Surfacing such human worth variables is a public commitment.² Similarly, as well-being authorities

²Internet; available from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/opinion/coronavirus-south-korea-church.html>; accessed May 19, 2021.

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attempt to make sense of their suggestions, specialists in the logical investigation of religion need to surface religion-abetted esteem decisions that influence ways of behaving pertinent to viral spread. Specialists need to explain where religion is creating issues and track down inventive ways of imparting elective reasoning strategies. Subsequently, this paper centres around analysing how the congregation didn't permit the Christian confidence consigned to the foundation despite the desolating pandemic that made no sense and each human exertion. The review will be restricted to how the congregation treated its individuals to hold their confidence regardless of depression and sadness.

Methodology

This paper utilized a spellbinding examination plan. Nonetheless, oral meetings and participatory perception were utilized to gather essential information consolidated in the examination work. The interviewees were priests from some chose nearby Baptist Places of worship. The paper likewise contains a survey of significant writing. It introduced the outcomes and examined its discoveries towards the finish of the article. The review uncovers that individual holy places have constraints in their reactions during the lockdown. The reason for the work is to show the idea of profound exercises embraced by chapels in Nigeria, particularly the Baptist category at the hour of the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown, how they figured out how to be applicable, and what contrasts there were in their association of strict life at that trying period. Such countless strict networks, particularly the Baptist people

group, were dynamic in the battle against Coronavirus (which is apparent in convincing individuals to remain at home during the lockdown. Making it obligatory for individuals to wear facial coverings and use liquor sanitisers is a clear update that; the congregation can stand any long-term trial. Hence, whether or not religion is a power to deal with doesn't do the trick.

Literature Review

The term 'pandemic' signifies an extremely irresistible sickness that spreads quickly among individuals and co-happens in one country as well as around the world.³ To the extent that the variables that prompted the pandemic are concerned, another irresistible viral lung illness started in Wuhan, China, toward the finish of 2019. It is likely a sickness related to Covid crossing the interspecies boundary. The pandemic is creating on a worldwide scale. The pandemic was effectively managed in Asian nations, such as China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan. In any case, it is quickly creating in Europe, the USA, and different regions of the planet that are presently seeing a third flood of contamination. The ongoing flare-up of Coronavirus has similitudes and contrasts with past intense respiratory conditions (SARS; 2002-2003) and MERS respiratory disorder (2012-present). The majority of the auxiliary SARS and MERS transmissions happened in clinical

³T.T. Bello, "Christian Marriage and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic: The Role of the Church – Anglican Church of Nigeria in Focus," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 7 (2015) : 18 – 24.

settings, while in Coronavirus, critical transmission happens between close contacts.⁴

One of the crucial strategies for restricting the development of Coronavirus is social removal. This social removal implies quarantine and an extreme change in contact between individuals, which goes towards virtualization and online associations. Religions as a rule and Christianity specifically, depend on strict networks, which infers that pandemics are difficult for the personality and life of these networks. The pandemic previously changed strict standpoints and exercises perpetually, both in love and human relations. Baptist show can't be equivalent to it used to be because how individuals love and relate have been profoundly impacted and radically different. Both the funds and church populaces have been impacted.⁵ The implication of the pandemic is still much felt in the church, resulting in a few individuals never returning after the pandemic

The Baptist Denomination

The Baptist denomination is a Christian group whose identity was baptism by immersion and congregational church government. The implication of the second denominational identity sometimes is interpreted as implying that the laity has absolute control of the church. The preacher is often seen as an employee of the church, though this is not an absolute truth.

⁴P. Avis ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 142.

⁵Verlun C. Gever et al. "Modeling Predictors of COVID-19 Health Behaviour Adoption, Sustenance and Discontinuation among Social Media Users in Nigeria," *Journal of Telematics and Informatics* 60 (2021): 2 – 5.

But unlike other evangelical, orthodox churches, Baptist seems to be the most liberal. The pastor does not enjoy the liberty of deciding over the choice of workforce or Church finances. The preacher derives his powers from the executive council of the church and the diaconate board, which in turn rely on the congregation in making decisions. Major decisions can only be taken when the church in conference, an assemblage of the whole congregation, particularly the Baptized members, has voted to support such. Despite the autonomy, each local assembly is attached to a confederation of local Baptist churches around to form an association, then a conference, and the convention for the whole country. The convention drew the article of faith, and each local assembly relies on crucial information from the association, conference, or convention to guide all the affiliate churches. That is why most lockdown actions were direct directives widely distributed online through social media for all members to comply.⁶

Effect of Corona-virus Pandemic on Christian Divisions

Notwithstanding moderate secularization and drive for individual character, the houses of worship and denominational affiliations influence individual moral decisions and business choices, particularly in Nigeria, where north of 45% of the residents pronounce alliance with one Christian category or the other. It is trying to conjecture the headings and profundity of vital changes during the improvement of the pandemic because various situations and the speed of advancement of Coronavirus are viewed in different nations. In Nigeria, it

⁶F.O. Talabi et al. "Effect of a Social Media-Based Counselling Intervention in Countering Fake News on COVID-19 Vaccine in Nigeria," *Journal of Health Promotion International*, (Oxford: University Press, 2021), 1 – 10.

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prompted extreme fiasco and the conclusion of the love communities.⁷

Nigerian Temples had to have limitations or suspended administrations. The choices taken in such a manner make them conflict with their practices since social events the entire gathering at joint administrations, while possibly a few out of every odd day, then to some degree on Sunday, is the substance of Christianity. Catholics and Standard don't close their congregation structures however limit the devotion to the principles given by state statutes. The limitation, not the conclusion, might be because there are areas of strength in the commitment to go to Sunday social occasions in the two networks. In Baptist Church, the number of members was genuinely diminished after the boycott was at first lifted to half limit, which the congregation may not likely recuperate from any time soon. In the questioning existing in Poland, very much like in others distributed via autocephalous Universal Houses of worship, we find the call to ordinary and ceaseless support in formal practices that should be done continually and reliably with cognizant consideration and discipline.⁸

Baptist church reaction to the lockdown and the scratch-off of administrations limits contact with the steadfast however doesn't cause correspondence to vanish out and out. All Places of worship, from Catholic and Conventional to Chapels after

⁷S. Bate, "Catholic Pastoral Care responds to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Southern Africa," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 57 (2003): 197 – 210.

⁸Oral Interview with P.A. Alao, Pastor, New Life Baptist Church, Akowonjo, Lagos, 21/12/2021.

the Transformation, utilize present-day advancements to guarantee they stay in contact with their individuals and render profound administrations.⁹ However, a portion of the temples were never ready for such a period. Chapels that can communicate their administrations on open TV and the radio did as such. No matter what the utilization of broad communications, they utilized virtual entertainment, like YouTube or Facebook. As a Minister from the Pentecost Church brought up, “This is an effectively open site that permits free situation, streaming, rating and remarking on films.”¹⁰ As per one more minister from the Baptist Church, “All administrations have been moved to the Web, even though the gatherings were tiny and a couple have over fifty individuals.” The loyal were meeting on the web. The choices came about because “the infection was forceful, and human wellbeing and life are more significant.”¹¹ Like every other church, the Baptist church was never ready for the Coronavirus pandemic, not geared up for whatever could influence love. However, the reaction was noteworthy.

Strict customs were enormously impacted. Coronavirus has impacted numerous strict practices. Significant functions of up close and personal otherworldly gatherings have been seriously restricted; blessed journeys were halted, bunch contacts during

⁹Oral Interview with A.K. Oke, Pastor, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pipe-Line Idimu, Lagos, 21/12/2021.

¹⁰Oral Interview with C.I. Chukwuemeka, Pastor, Baptist Church, Gowon Estate, Lagos, 22/12/2021.

¹¹I. Papadopoulos et al. “Spiritual Support during COVID-19 in England: A Scoping Study of Online Sources,” *Religious Health* 22 (April 2021): 1 – 22.

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festivals and merriments banished all over the planet to forestall the spread of Coronavirus 19. Religious associations like sanctuaries, mosques, temples, and houses of worship have offered elective approaches to delivering on the web administrations through the media like radio, TV, and live streaming. This large number of options doesn't give the advantages of up close and personal shared contact and love. This didn't permit most Christians to participate in the Blessed Fellowship. As indicated by Papadopoulos et al., a few Christian associations use vehicle parking areas for pass-through faith gatherings to make up for this shortfall.¹² Likewise, portable applications for supplication and reflections have been set up by strict pioneers/associations to support and keep individuals close. Religious rehearses have changed. A few Roman Catholic ministers suspended the standard commitment of not eating meat during Lent on Fridays all through the Coronavirus pandemic, which agreed with Lent. Catholic Church buildings requested that older individuals stay at home and not go to Sunday mass, which as a rule is compulsory. Additionally, Muslims mentioned noticing supplications at home and deferring Umrah and Hajj.¹³

As thought by Hatchett, there is a common association between disasters and otherworldliness or legalism.¹⁴ Whenever

¹²I. Papadopoulos et al., 1 – 22.

¹³Richard J. Hatchett, Carter E. Mecher, and M. Lipsitch, *Public Health Interventions and Epidemic Intensity during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic* (Internet); available from <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/104/18/7582.full.pdf>; accessed April 13, 2020.

¹⁴I. Papadopoulos et al., 1 – 22.

individuals are confronted with disaster, they will generally look for the essence of God. One system for doing this is through petition. It is generally acknowledged that request manages misfortunes, further focusing on that individuals adapt to conditions outside of their reach with God's assistance.

Forced to Reinvent: How Church Managed to be Relevant

The church was almost relegated to the background during the lockdown. Many Pastors started thinking of the essence of their services to the community, society, and the global world. Some congregations are willing to work with government and public health authorities to improve safety. At the same time, many preferred to stay home and encouraged their members to stay home and be waiting for divine help from God. That problem is their disdain for those the experts deem 'unscientific' or 'anti-intellectual.'¹⁵

The strict pioneers came on the web and began to guard the confidence as important to human security, affecting their adherents to recognize customs as antiquated as civilization; regarding just as urgent to their flourishing. Similarly as dealing with their circulatory strain or making sense of the significance of veils or vaccines involved what devotees can and ought to improve deal with their gamble during Coronavirus, this pandemic has opened the way for developments. Counting new advances to safeguard love administration and services, adjust profound practices and

¹⁵I. Papadopoulos et al., 1 – 22.

services, and revive connections among family, companions, gatherings, different establishments, and urban areas.¹⁶ The shift to 'virtual' love' is the most striking development ignited by the sudden interference of in-person love administrations, which the strict group pioneers underscored.

How Some Selected Baptist Churches Reinvented Themselves During the Shutdown

Church A: This particular Baptist church has an average of 150 members and an average income of about ₦400,000 per month. The clergy is the only paid worker of the church. He is paid ₦78,000 per month. The total expenses run by the church in terms of recurrent expenditure, which includes the payment of the pastor's rented apartment, fuel for the generator, and remittances to the association, conference, and convention, is over ₦300,000 per month. The capital project in the church was the construction of the children's church, often funded through borrowing and fundraising. During the shutdown, the income decreased to less than a hundred thousand. The church became very active in the WhatsApp group chat to fill the deficit by soliciting members to pay their tithe through the church account. Secondly, the church started house fellowship centres in which members that live very close to each other asked to meet twice a week, Wednesday and Sunday. They were asked to give their offerings. The money collected was brought to the church financial secretary in the church on Sunday evening. To meet the spiritual needs of members, the

¹⁶F. Chirico and G. Nucera, "An Italian Experience of Spirituality from the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Journal of Health* 12 (2020): 87 – 89.

pastor visits members regularly, especially during their house fellowship meetings.

The church did not use Zoom because it felt that it might not be effective because of the percentage of older members who were not technologically inclined. However, the meetings of Men's, Women's, and Youth's fellowships were held on WhatsApp. Apart from this, the pastor regularly sent the daily devotion, bible study, and Sunday school outlines to members through WhatsApp. Another exciting part of the regular activity of the church was regular engagements among members over different issues. This makes them engage in regular dialogue to keep in touch. This bridged the gap between members through constant social interactions.

One of the members with some financial wherewithal bought some foodstuff and distributed it to families in need. According to findings from the church, before the pandemic and the attendant lockdown, most church elders usually frowned at members using phones in the church either to access the church hymns or the bible. Everyone was required to bring a paper hymn book and a paper bible. But all these changed after the pandemic. Members now freely use their electronic devices during service, and elders are often forced to use WhatsApp. The church executive council report, which used to be printed, is now shared in the executive council Whatsapp group. This reduced costs and made it easy for those who did not attend a particular meeting to read the minute wherever they were.

Church B: The second church examined in this report used Facebook Live to stream. The preacher conducted live

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programmes on Wednesday and Sunday, and the members were expected to hook up during the live programmes. This church also used Zoom for their particular programmes, especially those meant for the members of their church. The church's Facebook page was run like a regular church programme, and many non-members joined in the live stream. Online church membership increased throughout the lockdown. After each service, the church always posted account details on the Facebook page for people to pay their tithes and offerings. The church could survive and meet its financial expenses even though it held no physical meetings. The church's online community increased in leaps and bounds as the church used paid Facebook page, which suggested the church page to people living near the church. This church had been active on social media before the lockdown; however, they explored better ways of reaching out to their members and non-members during the lockdown. During the lockdown, they saw Facebook as a veritable tool for evangelism, and the church became more visible as a result of the sustained activities online.

Whether from the experience of the first or second church, one thing stood out, the global church was caught unawares by the lockdown, which was occasioned by the global pandemic. The churches had to rethink how they could meet up with the spiritual needs of their members, encourage the members who felt religion was ineffective in the face of the ravaging pandemic, help members in dire financial situations and meet the church's financial obligations. Most Baptist Churches observed started using basic social media handles like

WhatsApp and Telegram. Still, they incorporated Facebook live broadcasts, Zoom, Google meetings, and uploading videos on YouTube for those using social media before. They also intensified the campaign for online cash transfers instead of physical cash payments. Church members were encouraged to use shortcodes to pay their obligations to the church. In the case of Church, as cited above, a telephone conversation between the pastor and church members increased. The church also borrowed the sum of ₦500.000.00 to continue to work on their children's church construction work at a 10% interest rate. Church B cited above has more technologically inclined members. The church used its social media handle to state the plausible causes and solutions to the pandemic. The church also organized online prayers, which they consider the panacea, a pandemic caused by humanity's sin.

Conclusions

In sum, the research confirmed that the church struggled for relevance during the lockdown and was forced to reinvent itself. Physical interactions were limited, and other religious activities were suspended. Religious leaders encouraged the faithful to stay at home but stay in touch with the church activities online. The review uncovers that individual temples have impediments relying upon the congregation's state before the closure. This work shows what exercises were embraced by houses of worship in Nigeria, particularly the Baptist Church at the hour during the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown; how they figured out how to be important, how they kept up with their significance, and what contrasts there are in their association of

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strict life. The way that such countless strict networks, particularly the Baptist people group, were dynamic in the battle against Covid-19, is a distinctive update that; the congregation can stand any long-term trial.